


## Study of common names of plants in ethnomedicinal and historical perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

The common or vernacular names avoid descriptive phrases and render our communication easier. In this paper, knowledge, experience and wisdom about medicinal virtues encoded in 47 common names belonging to 42 plant species are analysed. These ancient names actually immortalized medicolore of the past, which is neglected on the onset of modernization. The present author, therefore, seeks attention of researchers and learners of science of plant and medicine both. The golden treasure of the past medicinal knowledge if unearthed, provides guidelines for research in future. They may yield new or additional bioresources for betterment of mankind.

**Key Words:** Common Plant Names, Medicolore, History

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Naming and importance

Any object, plant or animal, are first made familiar by their names. Such names help mankind for communication, to know their past and present reference. These names have been given instinctively by men and women of different cultures, nations and languages. Such naming actually depends on the surrounding or ambient environment. Various features or conditions are naturally picked up by the coiners of names known to them. These names are passed over many generations by word of mouth but in later period and generations the features or bases of such names become little known. These names we refer as common names.

### 1.2. Naming and medicinal significance

Plants are being studied since ancient past from utilitarian point of view. After food, it is said that medicine is the first discovery of man. Plant species have been prized for their healing virtues from the earliest times still today. Many medicinal plants are given common, vernacular or local names in different civilisations. Their medicinal virtues are encoded in such names. On the onset of scientific naming of plants, the

common names have been ignored. We today reached to a precarious state that these meaningful names are rendered recondite. The present author paid some attention on this aspect of plant science (Patil, 1998, 2006, 2007; Patil and Patil, 2000, 2002; Patil and Pawar, 1999). The present communication is obviously in the same order. It is aimed at revealing medicinal significance using etymological tool. We, the modern men and women, are distanced from the glory, beauty and utility of common names of plants because of the forces of modernization. This papers intends to tap knowledge hidden in such names which will add more bioresources particularly for medicine.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The common names of plants have been freely borrowed from various literary sources as enlisted under references at the end of paper. The selected ones with medicinal significance are enumerated with their botanical name, family in parenthesis, which is then followed by one or two common names from different languages and cultures. Medicinal utility, name of human disease, people or country who used it are explained in historical viewpoint. The literary sources are given separately below to help the learners and researchers in future.

## 3. ENUMERATION

1. *Artemisia absinthium* (Asteraceae): Wormwood : It is traditional remedy for deworming in Europe (Andrew, 1996).
2. *Caulophyllum thalictroides* (Berberidaceae): Squaw Root: Native Americans widely used to facilitate childbirth. In western medicine, it is still used for various gynaecological afflictions (Andrew, 1996).
3. *Scutellaria lateriflora* (Lamiaceae): (i) Virginian skullcap : Various tribes of American Indians employed to treat menstrual complaints. Similarly, it was used in purification ceremonies when menstrual taboos had not been observed. (ii) Mad Dog: It was also used to treat rabies (Andrew, 1996).
4. *Symphytum officinale* (Boraginaceae): (i) Knitbone : it was used for mending factured bones. It encourages ligaments and bones to knit together firmly (K. Eogh, 1735, 1986). (ii) Confrey : This name is a corruption of 'con firma'. It makes bones firm after treatment. The generic name also signifies the same property (Andrew, 1996).
5. *Tanacetum parthenium* (Asteraceae): Feverfew : It was used to lower body temperature and cool it (Culpeper, 1653).
6. *Vitex agnus-castus* (Verbenaceae) : Chaste Tree : The name implies that it was used to reduce sexual desire. It was used by monks, presently, it is used for menstrual problems and infertility (Andrew, 1996).
7. *Zanthoxylum americanum* (Rutaceae): Toothache Tree : Native Americans used bark and fruits to alleviate toothache (Andrew, 1996; Hereman, 1868).
8. *Aristolochia clematidis* (Aristolochiaceae): Birthwort: It was used in Europe to treat disorders of uterus. Presently, it is used to prevent infection after childbirth. The generic name is also suggestive as it means 'excellent birth' and refers to induce labour (Patil and Shisode, 2014; Hereman 1868).
9. *Artemisia cina* (Asteraceae): Levant Wormwood : The Greeks were familiar about its utility to deworm intestinal worms and also used in present times (Andrew, 1996).
10. *Asclepias tuberosa*(Asclepiadaceae): Pleurisy Root : North Americans employed to reduce pains and inflammation of pleurisy. (Andrew, 1996; Hereman, 1868).
11. *Chenopodium ambrosioides* (Chenopodiaceae): Wormseed: Mayan people of Central America used to expel worms (Andrew, 1996).
12. *Cochlearia officinalis* (Brassicaceae): Scurvy Grass : The plant was used by sailors to prevent the onset of scurvy as it contains high vitamin-C content (Geoffrey, 1973).
13. *Collinsonia canadensis* (Lamiaceae): Stone Root : It is administered while treating kidney stones (Andrew, 1996).
14. *Echium vulgare* (Boraginaceae): Viper's Bugloss: It is thought preventive and a remedy against viper bite. The seeds are similar to the head of Viper, a snake species.
15. *Eupatorium purpureum* (Asteraceae): Gravel Root: It was used as preventive for the kidney and bladder stones (Andrew, 1996).
16. *Euphrasia officinalis* (Scrophulariaceae): Eyebright : It is used to tighten mucous membranes of the eye and to relieve the inflammation of conjunctivitis. It is also supposed to cure blindness (Patil, 2006; Andrew, 1996; Hereman, 1868).
17. *Lobaria pulmonaria* (Stictaceae): Tree Lungwort: It was recommended for healing pulmonary ulcers (Andrew, 1996).
18. *Polygala senega* (Polygalaceae): Seneca Snakeroot : It was used by Seneca tribe of North America against snake bite (Hereman, 1868).
19. *Pulmonaria officinalis* (Boraginaceae): Lungwort : It is held useful to treat pulmonary and chest infections (Patil, 2006; Andrew, 1996; Hereman, 1868).
20. *Hepatica acutiloba* (Ranunculaceae): Hepatica : The plant bears liver-shaped 3-lobed leaves which are employed to cure inflammation of liver. Common name is derived from hepatica i.e. to do with the liver (Patil, 2006; Geoffery, 1973).
21. *DentariaCalifornia* (Brassicaceae): Toothwort: Roots are used to tooth ailment (Jadhav, 2011; Patil, 2007; Hereman, 1868).
22. *Rauvolfia serpentina* (Apocynaceae): (i) Indian Snakeroot, (ii) Sarp Gandha: The roots are serpent-like in shape and hence were/are used to treat snake bite in India. The specific name also signifies similarly. The Indian Sanskrit name sarp Gandha also mean the same (Patil, 2010).
23. *Rotula aquatica* (Boraginaceae): Pashanbheda: The roots are used in native medicine in India to treat renal vesicle calculi. The common name mean that the roots of this plant break down the rocks and stones (Patil and Tayade, 2014).
24. *Merremia emarginata* (Convolvulaceae): (i) Akhudarni, (ii) Undirkani: The leaves are used as a antidote for rat bite. The common name suggest that leaves are shaped like ear-pinnae if rats (Pawar and Patil, 2012).

25. *Cissus quadrangula* (Vitaceae): Ashtirankhala : The stem axes are used in India to help cure bone fracture. The common name signifies the same (Patil, 2005).
26. *Pterocarpus santalinus* (Fabaceae): (i) Raktacandana, (ii) Ragatbel : Its bark is employed in India for purification of blood. The bark and blood both are red and hence the former beneficial (Patil, 2005, 2010).
27. *Blepharis repens* (Acanthaceae): Hadsan : The plant is used in native medicine in India for bone fracture (Patil, 2010).
28. *Bergenia ligulata* (Saxifragaceae) : Pasanbheda : Roots are employed to treat urinary stores by natives in India. Common name signifies breaking of stones by the roots in nature (Patil, 2005).
29. *Borago officinalis* (Boraginaceae): Borage : It was administered to produce sweat and reduce fever. Latin name bo(r)ago is derived from Arabic abu arak, meaning 'father of sweat' (Geoffrey, 1973).
30. *Chrysanthemum parthenium* (Asteraceae): Feverfew: It was widely employed against fever. Common name is originated from Anglo-Norman 'feverfue' and from the Latin 'febrifuga' to put fever to flight' (Geoffrey, 1973).
31. *Papaver rhoeas* (Papaveraceae): Headache : It was administered to treat headache and migraine (Geoffrey, 1973).
32. *Polygala vulgaris* (Polygalaceae): Milkwort: An infusion of the plant was administered to ladies to promote milk flow. The generic name polygala means poly-much, and gala-milk. This effect is also reputed in case of cattle (Geoffrey, 1973; Hereman, 1868).
33. *Lapsana communis* (Asteraceae): Nipplewort : The plant was useful in Germany to treat cracked nipples (Geoffrey, 1973).
34. *Ranunculus ficaria* (Ranunculaceae): Pilewort : The plant was used to treat piles. The similarity of swellings of piles and root-tubers of this species is evident while selecting it as a drug (Geoffrey, 1973).
35. *Herniaria glabra* (Illecebraceae): Rupturewort : Rupture occurs during the disease hernia and this plant species was used benefiting it. The generic name is suggestive of the said disease (Geoffrey, 1973; Hereman, 1868).
36. *Sassafras albidum* (Lauraceae) : Sassafras : Its medicinal action was to break the stone in urinary system. The generic name also signifies the same. Sassafras (Spanish) is derived from saxifrage (Latin) – to break rocks (Geoffrey, 1973).
37. (i) *Knautia arvensis* (Dipsacaceae), (ii) *Scabiosa columbaria* (Dipsacaceae): Scabious : The plant was employed as a remedy against scabies or scabby afflictions (Geoffrey, 1973; Hereman, 1868).
38. *Scorzibera hispanica* (Asteraceae): Scorzonera : It was used as antidote for snake bite. The generic name is derived from Italian word meaning 'snake plant' (Hereman, 1868).
39. *Prunella vulgaris* (Lamiaceae): Selfheal : It was used on wound and injuries (Geoffrey, 1973).
40. *Asplenium trichomanes* (Polypodiaceae): Spleenwort : This fern species was employed as a remedy against afflictions of spleen (Geoffrey, 1973; Hereman, 1868).
41. *Lathraea squamaria* (Orobanchaceae): Toothwort : It was used to treat toothache. The scaly hard leaves were likened to teeth (Geoffrey, 1973).
42. *Potentilla erecta* (Rosaceae): Tormentil : The roots was beneficial in treating pains or torment of toothache and griping stomach (Geoffrey, 1973).

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Common names wedded with medicolore

It is doubtless that majority of sources of medicines belong to plant kingdom. The literature on classic medicines shows that majority of them are the results of their traditional uses worldwide. It is also obvious that the traditional medicines or ethnomedicines gradually refined and got incorporated in certain systems of medicine like Ayurveda, Homoeopathy, Alopahy, Tibetan, Chinese or Western one. Eventually, many of these are verified on more scientific grounds like their chemical screening, biological activities, toxicity tests and clinical trials. Ultimately, the so called ethnomedicine turned out to be classic in modern times because of the efforts of expert medicinemen and herbalists (Patil, 2011). It is also very clear that the medicinal plants have their on history worldwide. They are usually referred by some common, vernacular or native names in various ethnic communities. Many times such names are very informative of their utilities (Patil, 2005, 2006, 2011). With the advent of modern trends of research, the hidden clues for medicinal virtues from the common or vernacular names have not been carefully attended. These names are also overshadowed by the method of scientific naming of plants (binomial nomenclature). The present author and his associates are engaged in divulging meaningfulness of the common names (Patil, 1998, 2000; Patil and Patil, 2000, 2002; Pawar and Patil, 1999). The present paper is one such attempt on the same line.

### 4.2. Revealing medicinal virtues

The medicolore passed orally over long past. On the advent of printing technique it became possible to put on written record. The medicolore or plantlore has been produced in ancient literature. Although so, there are little efforts to know bases and meaning especially of common plant names. Moreover, the method of binomial nomenclature pushed the study of common names on descending spirals. The notions, dogmas, knowledge, experience and perceptions of our ancestors are thereby being lost. To redeem the situation, it is worth to explain them and bring again to the fore front for the modern generations. The use-value of plants which was established in the ancient times is encoded in the common names. If they are analysed systematically, they will provide clue for virtues of several medicinal plants, which have been put aside from the focus of the modern man.

### 4.3. Present effort

In this communication, the author has presented 47 common names of plants exclusively of medicinal significance belonging to total 42 plant species. These names were coined in different human cultures as a result of their relationships with the ambient floral wealth. Their experience, experimentations and knowledge is revealed for diseases such as childbirth, menstrual complaints, bone fracture, fever, infertility, toothache, labour pain, intestinal worms, pleurisy, scurvy, kidney stones, eye afflictions, pulmonary ulcers, snake bite, chest infections, liver complaints, rat bite, blood impurities, headache, migraine, promoting milk, cracked nipples, piles, hernia, scabies wounds, injuries, spleen complaints, toothache, gripping stomach, etc. This list of remedies indicates that our ancients have fair knowledge of different human diseases and related medicaments. During modern period, these appear mostly forgotten. We should take notice of these much valuable, time-tested remedies employed by our ancestors. They will certainly add or supplement our present state of knowledge of medicinal plants. These should be undertaken for investigating on chemical, biological and clinical lines.

### 5. CONCLUSION

The common names are also meaningful and inherit some history of the concerned human societies. These are revealed analytically and systematically especially for their medicolore. Some common names are not readily recognized as the present human-beings cannot acquire knowledge of the ancients. However, the present author has endeavoured to find out their implied meanings and utilities. If we do not record the hidden treasure associated with the common names, it will be lost forever on account of forces of modernization. It is, therefore, necessary to conduct research on this aspect of science of plants and medicine. The present author endeavoured to bring forth the knowledge, experience and wisdom of our ancients for better future of mankind. Common names, whether English, Sanskrit, other Indian languages or even any language of the world, have been studied to unearth medicinal qualities of plants. This study will help solve, to some extent, in adding new bioresources useful for mankind. Even, the paper highlights significance of common names of plants.

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